

# **Making A Next Of Kin Notification**

Guidance for Coast Guard Operational Commanders  
and Search and Rescue Controllers.

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# Making a Next of Kin Notification

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## Introduction

Notifying the Next Of Kin (NOK) of the death of a loved one can be very difficult. Fortunately, we do not have to do it everyday. Our success allows us to be the bearer of good news far more often than bad. But despite our best efforts to rescue survivors, we are sometimes faced with the difficult task of informing the family that their loved one has died or has been seriously injured.

Since we do not get much opportunity to practice, it becomes more difficult to find the right words during the highly emotional situation. Group/Activity Commanders, acting as SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC) are responsible for ensuring timely NOK notifications are made following a maritime fatality. While the initial notification can be made through other resources, having an idea of what to say and how to say it *before* you find yourself in this position can make an undesirable task a little less difficult. This article will provide you with some tips on how to make a NOK notification.

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## Responsibility

ALDIST 041/99 requires Group/Activity Commanders to make NOK notifications personally whenever the use of local authorities is not practical or possible.

Several agencies may share NOK notification responsibilities. Local police departments, coroner/medical examiner's offices, and hospitals are trained and experienced in such notifications. While the Group/Activity Commander is responsible to ensure this notification is made, actual notification should be made by other, more qualified agencies whenever possible. Local and state police departments are usually in the best position to make notification visits. These agencies are networked with others outside their jurisdictions, and can make timely notifications in other counties or states. Group/Activity Commanders should partner with these agencies and establish agreements on how NOK notification should be made for local and out of state residents. It is paramount to avoid having two or more agencies contact the same family to inform them of the tragedy.

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## The SAR Controller's Role

The SAR Controller is often the first person within the SAR System to communicate with the family. This interaction can originate in several different ways. The family might already be aware of the situation and is calling the Command Center for assistance. Or, the SAR Controller might have to call the family first to gather additional information to help prosecute a case that the family is completely unaware of. Regardless of how the interaction begins, it is often compounded when one or more deceased victims are found during an ongoing search for additional survivors. When dealing with the family, the SAR Controller must act in the most humanitarian and professional manner possible.

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### The Notification

The NOK notification should be made in person whenever possible. Notification by telephone should be avoided. While local authorities normally make notifications, the Group/Activity Commander may have to make the notification directly. This usually occurs when the family is already aware of the ongoing SAR case and is in contact with your command center.

When local agencies are not able to make a NOK notification visit, it may be necessary for you to do so. When making a NOK notification, you should:

- Obtain as much information as possible before making the notification. Get the facts straight! Be prepared to answer questions that are likely to be asked. Know the name of the deceased and the relationship to the person being notified. You should be familiar with the circumstances of the death and the location of the body. Be ready to provide the phone number and a point of contact's name at the facility where the body is located. Try to have as many facts committed to memory as possible. You don't want to read a script.
- Wear an appropriate uniform, either Service Dress Bravo or Tropical Blue Long. Make sure you have your military identification card, and whenever possible, travel in a government vehicle. The next of kin may ask for identification.
- Make sure you know with whom you are talking. Ideally, you want to make one notification to the primary NOK. This may be the spouse of a married victim, or the parent or guardian. Use the NOK's name and the decedent's name as you introduce yourself. Example: Mrs. Brown, I'm Commander Smith. We have some news about your husband, Mr. Frank Brown. May I speak with you?"
- Make every attempt to inform the NOK in private. If you are at the residence, ask if you may enter the home. A fearful survivor who has guessed the reason for your visit may refuse entry, irrationally thinking that the message will not be delivered (and will not be true) if you are not allowed to enter. Talk quietly to the NOK until you can gain approval for entering the house and closing the door. Example: "Could we please just step inside the door Mrs. Brown? I need to talk with you privately." Do not enter without permission.
- Once inside, everyone should be seated. At this point, the NOK may realize what has happened on his or her own, and will be the first to ask if a relative is dead. The best way to break the news is to be direct and to the point. In the following example, the notifying officer's statements are given with typical responses from the NOK.

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Officer: I am Commander Smith of the U.S. Coast Guard.  
Are you the wife of Mr. Frank Brown?

NOK: Yes, I am.

Officer: I have some news about your husband.

NOK: He isn't dead, is he? Is he dead?

Officer: Yes, he is. I'm sorry to tell you that your husband  
is dead.

- Avoid sugar coating. Using euphemisms or vague language may delay the NOK's acceptance of what has occurred. The words "dead" and "death" have a finality that has been found to be helpful for gaining NOK acceptance. Here are some common responses to sugar coating the news:

Officer: Your son is no longer with us.

NOK: Oh, where did he go?

Officer: Your husband has gone before us.

NOK: Gone where?

NOK: Is it serious?

Officer: Yes ma'am. It's serious.

NOK: How serious?

Officer: Very, serious.

NOK: How very, very, serious?

Officer: So serious, I think you better lay down  
first.

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### Reactions and Response

Once you make the notification, be prepared for a wide range of responses. Gauge your actions on the NOK's responses. They may want more information immediately. If so, give as much information as you know, and pause to allow them to interrupt with questions. If the NOK remains silent, it is usually safe to proceed with details.

People react to the news of sudden losses in unpredictable ways. Be prepared for anything.

- Physical reactions might include fainting, hyperventilating, nausea, even cardiac arrest. Have the NOK's address memorized in case you need to call 911 for help. If you know the NOK has health problems, consider asking emergency medical services be on standby near the home.
- Anger and even rage are not uncommon. Be ready for the NOK to take their anger out on you. It's nothing personal. If the situation becomes dangerous, go to a safe location and call local police and emergency medical services for help. Never argue with the NOK.

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- The news may be so overwhelming that abnormal denial reactions may make the NOK unable to process the information. A denial reaction is nature's anesthetic that allows us to continue to function in the face of events that would otherwise be devastating. Extreme denial reactions go beyond this natural numbing, and leaves a person immobilized.
- Don't be surprised if the NOK shows apparent disinterest. This may be a form of denial.
- Uncontrolled grief and hysteria may occur. Crying is a normal and common reaction. However, some NOKs may react with uncontrolled grief. If the NOK's reaction seems to be one of hysteria, summon medical help and talk quietly and soothingly until help arrives. Speak in a slow, monotonous voice to sooth the NOK.
- Do not assume the NOK will hear accurately or remember anything you say. Most people who have sustained unexpected, catastrophic loss report that they have no recollection or only hazy memories of what they heard, said, or did in the first hours or even days after the event.
- At some point, the NOK might want to know if their loved one suffered. Regardless of your knowledge of the circumstances, your answer should be "no."
- Once the notification is made, you should ask the NOK whether other family members should be notified in person or by phone, and help the NOK arrange to make other notifications. Offer to telephone family, friends, or clergy. If the NOK needs transportation to make additional notifications, attempt to have a friend or neighbor drive. The NOK should not drive if at all possible.

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### Departure

There is no set time limit for your visit. You will probably know when it is time to go. The NOK should not be left alone, unless they insist. Try to have them accept the company of a close friend, neighbor, or other family member. Be prepared to stay with the NOK if they ask. Do not leave until you are certain that:

- the NOK is thinking clearly;
- is able to care for him/herself;
- has emotional control;
- is physically stable;
- has emotional support available.

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### Suspension Notification

Notifying the family that the search for a loved one has been suspended can be equally difficult. This kind of notification is usually compounded by the family's lack of acceptance when the body has not been recovered.

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When the Coast Guard is the lead search agency, the Group or Activity Commander should establish communications with the family as soon as possible into the search. This communication may be over the telephone or in person. The initial contact by the Group/Activity Commander should include a summary of the search efforts up to that point, and future plans.

After the initial contact, the Group/Activity Commander may assign a spokesperson for the Coast Guard. The spokesperson can be a senior officer of the command cadre or the Command or Group Duty Officer on watch, if appropriate. The spokesperson should remain fully informed of case developments and future plans, and be the single point of contact for the family. The family should be briefed on a regular basis. Although a spokesperson can be used to keep the family informed of day to day operations, the Group or Activity Commander should be the one to inform the family when it's time to suspend the search. The family deserves to hear of this decision by the person who is responsible for making it.

It is important to avoid making unrealistic promises to the family. Under extreme emotions, it is easy to misinterpret "We're doing everything we can to find your husband" with "We will find your husband."

Keep the briefings simple. Using SAR acronyms and terms such as Probability of Detection, Probability of Success, and Coverage Factor should be avoided since they are difficult to understand. Avoid reference to hypothermia tables or other tools that objectively measure survivability. To the NOK, the tables are statistics and numbers, not their loved one. The number and type of SAR resources, square miles searched, hours searched, and general weather conditions should be used when briefing the family. Those factors are usually easy enough to comprehend.

If they request it, the family should be given access to the Command Center to review the details of the case. Seeing the search planning and coordination efforts can help them accept the situation. The designated spokesperson should accompany the family when visiting the Command Center.

While you should remain optimistic when dealing with the family, it is important not to provide a false sense of hope that the search will be successful and survivors will be found. Experienced Group/Activity Commanders have found it helpful to prepare the family for the possibility of suspension in three phases:

- During the initial notification of the search effort, the Group/Activity Commander should include the possibility of not finding the search object with the list of possible scenarios. This "plants the seed" in their mind that their loved one may

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not be found at all, while still giving them hope that they will be found alive.

- About halfway through the search the family should be reminded that the search can not go on indefinitely. The Group/Activity Commander should let them know of future plans for the search and provide a date and time when the active search will be suspended if no significant developments occur. Whenever possible, this notification should take place at least 24 hours before actual suspension.
- The last step is notification that the search has actually been suspended. When the Coast Guard is the lead agency, this notification should come directly from the Group/Activity Commander. When the Group/Activity Commander can not make this call personally, the next senior officer should make the notification and pass along condolences on their behalf. Upon request, the family should be given a summary of the search effort and the opportunity to ask questions. The family should be reminded that although the active search has been suspended, Coast Guard units operating in the area will continue to monitor the area for significant sightings.

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### Where to Get Help

When you must personally make a NOK notification, organizations such as Good Grief, Red Cross, local hospice, mental health centers and crime victim advocacy groups may have trained counselors that can accompany you on your visit. In addition, there are several organizations and support groups dedicated to helping people cope with grief. These organizations provide training and support to emergency medical service agencies and health care professionals. Access to these groups can be made through local hospitals, telephone directories, and the World Wide Web.

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### Bibliography

Guidance contained in this paper was obtained from numerous sources, including various District SAR Plans and:

- National Search and Rescue Manual, Vol I, COMDTINST M16120.5A
- ALDIST 041/99 Interim Guidance – SAR Case Information Coordination and Family Interaction
- U.S. Navy Casualty Assistance Calls Officer Course Student Guide, COMNAVBASE Norfolk, VA, 1998
- NAKUSP Royal Canadian Mounted Police Victim Witness Services Standard Operating Procedures

## **Making a Next of Kin Notification**

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